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THE OWL AND THE HARE IN THE POPULAR BELIEFS OF THE MEDIEVAL MONGOLS*

by
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The Mongols, according to Ricoldo da Monteroce,¹ “say they are the people of God, and in support of this they adduce the many miracles that coincided with their advent, as also the victories which they gained. And they say that God called them from the mountains and the desert places and sent before them His messengers, the beast and the bird of the desert, i.e. the hare and the owl.” In a later passage² Ricoldo recounts the story of the hare and the owl in some detail:

Exierunt vero Tartari. Cum vero vltra mountes illos, de quibus videtur dicere Boecius,³ quod ad eos nec fama Romanorum veniebat, cum essent in locis quasi bestie, erant pastores et intendebant venacioni. Ipsi autem montes, qui diuidebant eos inter desertum et prouinciam habitabilem, erant inaccessibiles, nisi per quendum locum, vbi erat fortilicium maximum, et nullus in eo. Cum autem ibi aliquis appropinquaret, tantus audiebatur tumultus quasi equorum et hominum et maxime strepitus tubarum, quod omnis audiens

* The revised text of a paper read at the 21st Meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference at Manchester, June, 1978. It is based upon the second part of a lecture entitled “The Popular Beliefs of the Thirteenth-Century Mongols according to the *Itinerarium* of Ricoldo da Monteroce,” delivered to the Manchester University Egyptian and Oriental Society on the 19th November, 1962. An article based upon the first part of that lecture and entitled “The Attitude of the Thirteenth-Century Mongols towards Nature” was published in *CAJ*, XII/1–2, 177–185, having previously been read as a paper at the 20th Meeting of the PIAC at Leiden, August, 1977.

¹ J. C. M. Laurent, *Peregrinatores medici alvi quatoor* (Leipzig, 1873) pp. 117–118.

² Laurent, p. 119.

³ Boethius *Consolatio philosophiae*, ii. 8.

“Aetati denique Marci Tullii, sicut ipse quodam loco significat, nondum Caucasum montem Romanae rei publicae fama transcederat . . .”

terrītus fugiebat. Hoc autem erant artificio venti. Quidam autem ex Tartaris, intendens venacioni, secutus est canes persequentes leporum. Lepus vero directe fugit ad fortilicium, et intrauit, fugiens canes. Venator autem auditate prede et venacionis non aduertit tumultum, et cum valde propinquus timeret intrare, venit bubo et stans supra portam cepit cantare. Tunc Tartarus dixit intra se: "Non est habitacio hominum, vbi lepus fugit et bubo cantat." Et sic fiducialiter intrans neminem inuenit. Et locum lustrans et fictio-nem tumultus inuenicus redit ad suos et peciit fieri princeps, si illos cum omni securitate transduceret. Et sic transierunt. Referens autem, quomodo intrauerat sequens leporem et indicium bubonis, ordinauerunt Tartari, quod, licet necessitate coactus fugeret canes, tamen quia quasi quodammodo indicauit viam, dignus erat honore, et ideo honorant leporem et depingunt eum in suis armis et tentoriis; bubonem vero, quia nulla necessitate coactus apparuit et supra portam sedens cantauit, dicunt fuisse angelum Dei, et Deus vocauit eos, vt venirent. Et ideo bubonem dixerunt non mediocriter esse honorandum, vt leporem. Ordinauerunt ergo, quod honorabiles et maiores Tartarorum deferrent plumam et quasi coronam de pelle bubonis supra capillum. Vnd ita occiderunt omnes bubones, quod vix inenitur aliquis in partibus orientis. Sed et mercatores de partibus occidentis occidunt bubones et portant eis pelles. Venditur enim vna bona pellis vsque ad viginti libras. Et sic Tartari reddiderunt amico suo buboni mala pro bonis, quia, dum dicunt eum honorare, eum decoriant et occidunt, et faciunt eis coronam de pelle amici, in hoc conuenientes cum Tartaris infernalibus,⁴ scilicet demonibus, quia coronam sibi faciunt de animabus peccatorum, qui eis seruiunt, semper malun pro bono amicis reddentes.

To Ricoldo's remarks about the hare we shall return later. A contemporary of Ricoldo, the Armenian Hayton, tells a different story to account for the Mongols' custom of wearing owl feathers, a story which has passed into the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville.⁶ It is in-

⁴ The familiar pun on *Tartari* and *Tartara*. See W. W. Rockhill, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World . . .* (London, 1900) p. xix and note 1; Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di Frate Ricoldo da Montecroce* (Rome, 1948), pp. 57–58.

⁵ *La Flor des estoires de la terre d'Orient*, iii. 4–5. See *Recueil des historiens des Croisades, Documents arméniens* II (Paris, 1906) pp. 150–151, and for the Latin translation, *ibid.* p. 286.

⁶ See M. C. Seymour (ed.), *Mandeville's Travels* (Oxford, 1967), p. 163.

corporated in an interesting passage in the work of von Strahlenberg,⁷ which I should like to quote in full:

There are a Sort of Owls in *Siberia*, not far from Crasnoyahr,⁸ which are as white as Snow, and as large as Hen-Turkeys; the Russians call them *Lün*, and *Ulün*; The Tartars, *Ackia* and *Acky*; and the *Kalmucks* name them *Zagan Schub*, and also *Zagan Gorochun*.⁹ The latter hold them sacred, and suffer no-body to shoot them. I never ask'd them the Reason of it; But I find in Hübner's *Political History of Tartary*,¹⁰ in an Extract of the Life and Actions of

⁷ Philip John von Strahlenberg: *An Historico-Geographical Description of the North and Eastern Parts of Europe and Asia . . .* (London, 1738), p. 434.

⁸ The present-day Krasnoyarsk, the administrative centre of the Krasnoyarsk territory: it was founded in 1638 as the fort of Krasny Yar on the left bank of the Yenisei.

⁹ None of these names can be applied to the bird to which Strahlenberg is obviously referring, i.e. the snowy owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*). Of the "Russian" names *Lün* is conceivably *lun* "hen-harrier" or it may, like *Ulün*, be a corruption or misreading of *flin* "eagle owl". The term "Tartar" in Strahlenberg, so Professor Gerhard Doerfer informs me, is a very vague one and can refer even to the Tungus; and, in fact, of the two "Tartar" names one is Mongol and the other Turkish. At first glance it would appear that the first element of both *Ackia* and *Acky* is the Turkish *aq* "white", as was apparently Strahlenberg's own impression, and we might expect them to mean, like the following "Kalmuck" names, "white bird" and "white animal" respectively. In fact the initial *t* of both words must have faded or been clipped away in Strahlenberg's field notes by the time he consulted them, and the words are Mongol *takiya* and Turkish *taquq*, both meaning of course "domestic fowl". This ingenious and convincing solution of the problem is due to Professor Larry V. Clark and was communicated to me by Professor John R. Krueger. As for the "Kalmuck" names *Zagan Schub* and *Zagan Gorochun* see Krueger, *The Kalmyk-Mongolian Vocabulary in Strahlenberg's Geography of 1730* (Stockholm, 1975), p. 150, where he equates them with written Mongolian *čazan šibayun* and *čayan görügesün*. On this passage Doerfer comments (i) that the German original has not Schub, but Schubo, which is nearer to the original form; (2) that intervocalic *s* is preserved in Kalmuck but becomes *h* in Buryat and that, in consequence, *Gorochun* seems to represent a Buryat form; and (3) that according to K. M. Cheremisov's Buryat-Mongol-Russian dictionary *sagaan šubuun* means "swan" and *sagaan gürööhen* "polar bear"! I am most grateful to the three scholars named for their elucidation of this passage in Strahlenberg's work, the examination of which amply bears out the judgement passed elsewhere by Doerfer on the Swedish traveller's linguistic knowledge: "Die Sprachkenntnisse v. Strahlenberg's scheinen demnach nicht sehr bedeutend zu sein, und sein Text ist mit großer Vorsicht zu behandeln." See his *Ältere westeuropäische Quellen zur kalmückischen Sprachgeschichte (Wissen 1692 bis Zwick 1827)* (Wiesbaden, 1965), p. 13.

¹⁰ I have been unable to identify this work by the German encyclopaedist, Johann Hübner (1668–1731). Hübner's information is obviously derived, at first or second hand, from Hayton: there is no evidence of the survival of

Cingis-Chan, Founder of the Monarchy of the Mungal and *Kalmuck Tartars*, the following Account: It happen'd that he, and his small Army, were surpriz'd, and put to Flight, by his Enemies; And seeking to conceal himself in a small Coppice, where he might very easily have been discover'd by the Enemy, an *Owl*,¹¹ which is a very shy Bird, settled upon one of the Bushes, which made his Pursuers desist from looking for him there, not thinking any Man could be hid where this Bird would stay: This gave *Cingis-Chan* an Opportunity of making his Escape by the Favour of the Night. And seeing the Preservation of his Life was entirely owing to the *Owl*, this Bird was, from that Time, look'd upon so sacred, that, every one of them, wore a Plume of *Owl's* feathers on his Head. Now since in these Parts, there are white *Owls* which are rever'd by the People, that historical Passage seems to carry along with it the Face of Truth. For this is certain, that the *Kalmucks*, when they celebrate any great Festival, always wear colour'd *Owl's* Feathers in their Caps, and the *Wogulitzi*¹² have, among other idols, a wooden Owl, to which they fasten the Legs of a natural One.

such a legend amongst the Mongols themselves. This has not prevented a contributor (Northcote W. Thomas) to Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* from stating, on the basis of this very passage, that "the Kalmucks have a saga as to the owl's having saved the life of Jingsis Khan, resembling the story of Bruce's escape." See the entry on Animals, I 4836–5356 (5236). The nearest parallel to the legend in a Mongol source is a story preserved in the *Bolur Erike* about a young man, the adopted son of Genghis Khan, who took off his boots and went to sleep on the steppe. He was awakened by the shrieking of an owl and, in his annoyance, flung his boots at the bird. A poisonous snake fell out of one of them. When he returned home he told Genghis Khan of his adventure, and Genghis Khan said: "While the owl is abominated by everybody, it has given thee an exceedingly good sign. Thou must therefore order thy posterity not to kill owls. It was to bring this about that (the owl) produced the snake." See Walther Heissig, *Bolur Erike: "Eine Kette aus Bergkristallen", eine mongolische Chronik der Kienlung-Zeit, von Rasipungsuy (1774–75) literaturhistorisch untersucht* (Peking, 1946), p. 53.

¹¹ In Hayton "un oisel, qui avoit non duc" *Recueil*, p. 151), "quedem avis, buffo, sive duc" (ibid. p. 286): presumably the long-eared owl (*Asio otus*).

¹² The last of Strahlenberg's three references to the Voguls, for whom, unlike the Cheremiss and the Mordvins, he has no special entry in Chapter XIII. On pp. 96–97 he refers to a Vogul ritual following the killing of bears. The passage is quoted by the late Professor Phillips in a short article in which he suggests some connection between this ritual and Southey's fairy tale "The Three Bears." See E. D. Phillips, "The Three Bears", *Man*, 54, p. 123. The second reference to the Voguls is on p. 361, where Strahlenberg speaks of the elk hides sold at a fair held annually in the Pechora basin by the Voguls, Zyryans, Ostyaks and "other Pagans".

The story of Genghis Khan's taking refuge from his enemies in a thicket is of course taken at second hand from *La Flor des estoires de la terre d'Orient*: it is apparently a widely divergent variant of the story told in the *Secret History of the Mongols*¹³ about the youthful Temüjin's attempt to escape from the pursuing Tayichi'ut, who do in fact finally capture him despite what appear to be supernatural warnings. As for as the Mongols' wearing of owl feathers the practice is referred to in one passage in Rashīd al-Din¹⁴ in which he describes the lawless behaviour of the Il-Khan's falconers. They would, he says, deal any chance passerby a blow on the head with a metal object¹⁵ and snatch off his hat or turban explaining as they did so that no everyone had the right to stitch an owl feather to his headgear. It was in fact, according to Ricoldo,¹⁶ only the "honorable et maiores Tartarorum" who were entitled to wear these feathers. The practice is attested in modern times, not only amongst the Kalmucks but also amongst the Kazakhs, and the Turks of the Altai. In an article in the *National Geographical Magazine* on the Kazakhs who escaped from Sinkiang into India we read:¹⁷ "The head of the household wears a high-topped bonnet, fringed with fur and covered with patterned silk. A tassel of owl feather, symbol of good luck, waves from the crown. Believed sacred, owls are captured alive, stripped of the downy feathers under the tail and released." And in the description of a wedding we are told:¹⁸ "As tradition demanded, the women threw pieces of bread at the groom, who placed in his tall hat the owl feathers symbolic of good luck." Again we are informed by Rinchin¹⁹ that the Kazakhs of Mongolia, to

¹³ §§ 79–80.

¹⁴ Karl Jahn (ed.) *Geschichte Gāzān-Hāns* (London, 1940), p. 342; A. Alizade (ed.), *Jāmi 'al-tawārīkh*, III (Baku, 1957), 547.

¹⁵ An iron *kūrābasi*. Professor Doerfer in a written communication suggests with some diffidence that this word may be derived from Mongol *Körbesi* "eruption of the skin" used in a metaphorical sense. It is perhaps employed here with the meaning of a stud or boss on the falconer's belt.

¹⁶ See above, p. 68. On the other hand, according to Hayton (*Recueil*, p. 152) "touz les Tartars portent la plume sur la teste." The Latin text (*Recueil* p. 287) is even more emphatic: "... omnes Tartari indifferenter super capita plumas portant."

¹⁷ Milton J. Clark, "How the Kazakhs fled to Freedom," *National Geographical Magazine*, CVI, 621–644 (642).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 638.

¹⁹ B. Rinchin, "Mélanges ethnographiques," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, XX, 21–22 (22) Cf. Uno Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker* (Helsinki, 1938), p. 524: "Es ist interessant festzustellen, daß gerade der

protect small children and frighten off evil spirits, suspend from the child's cradle or its clothing, scraps of hedgehog skin, the claw of a bear, or the talon and feathers of an owl. Nor should we forget that the shamans of the Altai and Sayan region wore owl feathers as tassels in their headgear.²⁰ An finally we may quote Castagné's description of a Kazakh *baqcha*:²¹ "In one of his hands, the *baqcha* carries an iron-clad staff, 'asā, on which he leans; owl feathers adorn one end of it, which is likewise fitted with rings, which, by clashing together, are conductive, along with the feathers, to expelling or rather warding off evil spirits."

If then Ricoldo's testimony about the owl is so amply confirmed by later observers, what are we to make of his statement that the Mongols depicted the hare upon their arms and their tents? That the hare was regarded as a sacred animal amongst many peoples is a fact beyond dispute.²² Indo-European nations in Europe and Western Asia banned the use of its name and the eating of its flesh; the ban on its flesh was observed by the Jewish people also. The taboo seems however to have extended no further east than Persia and was certainly unknown amongst the Altaic peoples. Both the Hsiung-nu and the I'u-chüeh hunted and ate the hare.²³ The Khitan had a hare-shooting ceremony which is described in the *Liao shih*:²⁴ hares were carved from wood, and the people divided themselves into two groups and rode on horseback to shoot at them. They seem, however, to have hunted real hares also.²⁵ As for the Kalmucks, Strahlenberg,²⁶ who tells us that they regard owls as sacred and will

Uhu, dessen Äußeres die Schamamentracht in der Gegend des Altai und Sajan nachahmt, nach dem Volksglauben die Kraft Geister zu verscheuchen habe. An manchen Orten ist es, wenn Kinder krank sind, heute noch Sitte, einen Uhu zu fangen und zu füttern in dem Glauben, daß der Uhu die der Kinderwiege nahenden bösen Geister abhalte." Here, and in the passage referred to in the following note, Harva speaks of the *Uhu*, i.e. the eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*). In the legend recounted by Hayton we have presumably to do with a smaller variety of owl. See above p. 68, note 11.

²⁰ Harva, p. 504.

²¹ J. Castagné, "Magie et exorcisme chez les Kazak-Kirghizes et autres peuples turks orientaux," *Revue des Études Islamiques*, IV, 53-151 (67).

²² See J. A. Boyle, "The Hare in the Myth and Reality: A Review Article," *Folklore*, 84, pp. 313-326.

²³ See Boyle, *op. cit.*, p. 319, note 49.

²⁴ Karl A. Wittfogel and Fêng Chia-Shêng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907-1125)* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 270.

²⁵ Wittfogel and Shêng, p. 284.

²⁶ P. 371.

allow no one to shoot them, tells us also that they hunt and eat hares. Only in Riasanovsky²⁷ do we find some evidence of the hare as a sacred animal. Writing of the Tartars of the Kuznetsk District of the Tomsk Province, who are related to the Altaic group of Siberian Tartars, he remarks that "some of them worship wooden idols, others a hare or bear, the paw of which they kiss even when taking an oath."

Sir Henry Yule²⁸ has described the *Travels* of Marco Polo as "a great book of puzzles, whilst our confidence in the man's veracity is such that we feel certain every puzzle has a solution." I feel that Yule's words may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the *Itinerarium* of Ricoldo da Montecroce. A solution may yet be found for the puzzle of the hare as the Mongols' animal guide and, apparently, as an object of their worship. Certainly this valuable source on the thirteenth-century Mongols deserves to be presented in a really critical edition based on the various manuscripts and translations enumerated by Monneret de Villard;²⁹ still better would be a fully annotated translation.

²⁷ Valentin A. Riasanovsky, *Customary Law of the Nomadic Tribes of Siberia* (The Hague, 1965), p. 48.

²⁸ Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *The Book of Sir Marco Polo* (London, 1903), I, 1.

²⁹ Pp. 15–18.